

Sensory Reliquaries: Scent, Matter and Memory in SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) Fiction

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Received: 20 Jul 2026; Received in revised form: 15 Aug 2026; Accepted: 19 Aug 2026; Available online: 23 Aug 2026

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Abstract— *SWANA isn't just a geographical map; it is a horizontal network of solidarity. It connects the writers in Tehran to the refugee in Syria, proving that across these artificial borders, people are fighting the battles to remember who they are. If a dictator can burn a book, he cannot burn a memory trapped inside a human sense, SWANA and South Asian writers delve deep into this and produced a brilliant way to keep their homeland alive, they turn the physical world into secret vault. This paper investigates how SWANA literature tracked memory through the stubborn stain of dried ink in Stationery Shop of Tehran by Marjan Kamali and the volatile drop of amber perfume in Book of Everlasting Things by Anchal Malhotra. They produced sensory-counter archive to prove that the material archive holds the past alive in its most uncompromised, unburnable form.*



Keywords— *SWANA literature, Sensory-Counter Archive, Memories, Homeland*

I. INTRODUCTION

When geopolitical crises- such as 1947 Partition of India, the 1953 Iranian coup, the devastating wars in Palestine and Syria- fracture the nation-state, official history books are inevitably censored, weaponized, or reduced to ashes. For writers operating within SWANA and South Asian exile literature, this structural deletion of the facts poses a vital question: *How do you preserve the truth of a homeland when the official paperwork has been erased?* The answer is found in a radical shift away from Eurocentric terms. For over a century, the label “Middle East” was used to unite this diverse culture together. The term was invented in 1902 by an American military strategist. To the British empire it was just a label – it literally meant “the land that is midway between London and the Far East.” To fix this, writers and thinkers started using the term SWANA which stands for Southwest Asian and North African. This isn't just a label; it's a new way to regain control. SWANA describes the land by its actual geography, not by how far it is from Europe. More importantly, it acts like a big network. Instead of looking at countries like Iran, Syria, Cyprus, or Palestine as isolated problem zones, SWANA connects them. It allows us to see how people across these borders share the same

struggles with war, leaving home, and trying to survive. Marjan Kamali and Anchal Malhotra construct a “material archive of memory.” Using *Bill Brown's Thing Theory* (*Thing theory, 2001*) – the idea that everyday objects become hyper-important “things” when our world breaks down – these authors hide history where no empire can touch it: In a stubborn stain of dried ink on a diverted love letter, in a distilled essence of artisanal perfume that smells like a city before the bombs. These novelists prove that political powers can erase physical boundaries on paper, but they cannot destroy the people's real, living memories and culture. By archiving trauma through scent and letters, these writers ensure that the earth itself remembers what the politicians try to deny. They fill their writing with rich botanical and culinary anchors that function as a storeroom that holds on to history, traditions, and memories of home. In intertwining romance with history, the novel invites readers to consider how words – whether spoken, written or silenced – can bridge or break the distance between hearts.

II. UNLOCKING THE OLFACTORY VAULT IN STATIONERY SHOP OF TEHRAN

Mr. Fakhri's shop in Tehran is an intellectual romantic and affective asylum infused with the aromas of 'printing ink, thick paper and soothing dried herbs.' It is a space deliberately insulated from the turbulent streets of 1953 Tehran, where political unrest is taking place. Kamali uses the physical letters, the translation of Rumi and Hafiz, and the quiet corners of the shop to symbolize the democratic promise, cultural richness, and romantic hope of Iran's youth. In the Stationery Shop of Tehran, letters act as silent yet enduring witnesses to Roya and Bahman's love, preserving emotions that cannot always be spoken aloud.

Lord Byron once said "*Letter writing is the only device for combining solitude with good company.*" This aligns perfectly with the way letters in Kamali's novel serve as a bridge between separated lovers, preserving intimacy despite distance. Their romance begins in the quiet intimacy of the stationery shop, where handwritten words become a bridge between their hearts. Through letters, they share their dreams, hopes, and promises, allowing their love to flourish even in the shadow of social expectations and political unrest. "*In that shop she could breathe in the scent of paper and ink and feel the promise of words she could do.*" (Kamali,3) This very sentence forms the novel's central theme. The stationery shop is not just a setting but a symbolic element of the intellectual and civic life that 1953 Iranian coup d'état would attempt to destroy.

Drawing upon Bill Brown's *Thing Theory* in which he posits difference between "objects" and "things". He says we only truly confront the "Thingness" of our world when the smooth flow of our life is interrupted. This usually happens in three ways: when it breaks down, when it hurts us and when it loses its social function. In books, and stories authors don't just include physical prop to make a scene look pretty. Under Thing Theory, the items in a story-like Roya's letters or the ink bottles in *The Stationery Shop* are not passive background noise. When these items break, get lost or are physically touched decades later, they "act". They carry emotional weight, disrupt the characters' lives, and force both the characters and the readers to stop and pay attention to the heavy, physical reality of the world. The initial description of the shop introduces it as a dense, sensory warehouse where history and literature are preserved in physical form. "*The shop smelled of standard printing ink, the pungent vinegar of glue, and heavy, thick, warm paper. To Roya, it was the most beautiful smell in the world. It smelled of potential, of words waiting to be built, of truths waiting to be told.*" (Kamali,11) Under Brown's framework, this introduces the object phase of the material culture. The ink, glue, and paper have a clear, comforting

socio-functional value: they are the building blocks of intellectual and romantic potential. The sensory focus shows that the archive is experienced bodily before it is analysed cognitively.

III. ITTAR AS A VESSEL FOR PRE-PARTITION MEMORY IN BOOK OF EVERLASTING THINGS

Anchal Malhotra an oral historian famously known for analysing the Partition of India through the material object refugees carried, used this methodology to her fiction *The Book of Everlasting Things*, the material world does not merely reflect the characters; it preserves their survival. Anchal Malhotra in an interview with Vivek Tuteja says;

"The little kernel of childhood memory became the beginning of the story about a family that are surrounded by perfume and imbued with perfume on everyday basis."

This idea of using perfume and ittars as a quintessential part of the story came from her childhood memory. The aromas helped her to form the storyline. *The Book of Everlasting Things*, a debut novel serves as an intentional experimental space for Thing Theory and Olfactory Materialism. Liquid perfumes (ittars), calligraphic ink, and physical surfaces do not merely reflect the characters inner lives-they become alternative sensory archives that survive the physical and geopolitical fracture of Lahore in 1947. Before 1947 Partition fractures the landscape, the perfume shop, *Ittar Kada*, functions as a storehouse where memory and geographical space are preserved as a liquid matter rather than lines drawn on paper. There is an instance in the story where Samir's initiation into perfumery under his uncle Vivek is filled with deep reflections on how scent serves as the spiritual and physical archive of the land.

"A perfume is not a string of smells one has merely blended together on a whim. A perfume has occasion and history. It has a landscape, a body, and a response." (Malhotra,88)

Scent acts as an unconventional, powerful way to store history and memory. Under the lens of olfactory materialism, Malhotra positions the fluid of *ittar* as an uncensorable, non-visual map. Perfume is not merely an essence or fragrance, it's a poetry; poetry of love and longingness. It is a poetic essence that is extracted from the heart of earth. Vivek Vij in the novel says; "*Agar zameen se koi shayari banti ho, to wahi mitti ittar ki Khushboo hai, if there were ever a poetic essence to be extracted from the heart of earth, it will be smell of mitti ittar.*" (Malhotra,141)

Samir and Firdaus's love story unfolds through powerful language of scent. Fragrance plays a crucial role in building their relationship. The bottle is not merely a fragrance extracted from tuberose but a scent distilled from the very

soul of his beloved; a fragrance that helps both of them to remember their love. It is what brings them together- “*Bottle still in hand, he inhaled deeply with the closed eyes a new smell snaked around him. Everything about it was ordinary, yet something stood out so clearly that he was unable to ignore it. He smelled her before he saw her.*” (Malhotra, 49)

Firdaus’s presence is always felt in the perfumes created by Samir. The perfume “*Khazin-e-Firdaus, the keeper of paradise*” is creation by Samir to remember his beloved offering a fragrance that allows him to dive into her very soul. As Ralph Waldo Emerson says “Happiness [Love] is a perfume you cannot pour onto others without getting a few drops on yourself.” Using Bill Brown’s *Thing Theory*, Anchal Malhotra shows how love, longing and grief can be preserved through material things.

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